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8TH DISTRICT, MARYLAND

COMMITTEE ON
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COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 5, 2007

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Elizabeth M. Hewlett
Chair, Washington
Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
600 Fifth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

John B. Catoe
General Manager, Washington
Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
600 Fifth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

RE: Hearing Number 175, Docket Number R06-5

Dear Mr. Simpson, Mr. Glenn, Ms. Hewlett, and Mr. Catoe:

I am writing in regard to the proposed development at the Takoma Metro Station.

In my view, the proposed joint development project remains significantly flawed. I urge the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to reject the plans for development at the Takoma Metro station as currently outlined.

In October 2006, many members of the community presented testimony at the Public Hearing hosted by WMATA on this issue. We urged WMATA to ensure that certain fundamental principles were met in reviewing the proposal for this development. Specifically, and most importantly, we urged WMATA to ensure that this development was "TRANSIT-oriented development" -- that while it accommodated the needs of new residents and businesses located on the development site, WMATA needed to be especially mindful of the needs of the transit-riding public and of the neighborhoods surrounding the Metro station.

We urged WMATA, pursuant to its own mission, to put the needs of the commuting public first -- to provide sufficient access and accommodation for buses; safe access for pedestrians, cyclists and the disabled; appropriately placed taxi and Kiss-and-Ride stands; and requisite green spaces. Moreover, we urged WMATA to ensure that, in considering the economics of this proposal, it was being a responsible steward of public resources.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that these requests have been appropriately considered by WMATA, as reflected in its Staff Report. My concerns are outlined below.

First, the plan combines cars and buses in a single traffic circle. This is a serious degradation of the current arrangement where private and public vehicles are separated into two different lots. This combination increases the potential for car/bus collisions, raises serious safety concerns for pedestrians, and potentially impedes bus traffic. The recent tragic bus-related pedestrian deaths are a chilling reminder of the imperative to place safety concerns at the forefront of all planning decisions. WMATA has recently proposed adding a fence around the new "combined" circle to prevent pedestrian drop-offs, but I remain concerned whether this modification will adequately address the issue of commingled traffic in the circle.

I am also concerned that safe, convenient access for handicapped riders has not been adequately demonstrated. As WMATA works to transition more riders from MetroAccess to regular bus and rail service, it is even more critical that our Metro facilities meet ADA requirements. Recent modifications to the original plans incorporate separate ADA/disability drop-off locations. Unfortunately, these locations appear to be farther away from the elevator than the present location. Additionally, the proposal does not appear to include any handicapped parking spaces. As currently designed, this project is potentially out of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

One area that requires additional scrutiny is whether the proposed sale preserves enough land to provide for the station's future transit needs. The number of bus bays is a case in point. Although the Takoma Transportation Study recommends 12 bays, only ten are proposed. The plan continues to depend on public streets for bus circulation while it simultaneously seems to narrow Eastern Avenue to allow for an expanded development footprint. Pedestrians who are trying to gain access to the station from the Maryland side of Eastern Avenue -- a typical walking commute for many who live in the neighborhood -- will be at risk. With projections of continued population growth in the entire Washington metropolitan area and in this vibrant urban Takoma community, it is essential that we adequately plan for future needs.

The total number of parking spaces is another area of concern. While we all remain committed to an environmentally sensitive plan, the 1975 WMATA Board decision to limit parking at Takoma Station to 100 spaces may no longer be applicable for current and future needs. Community members also question the propriety for the planned townhouses to have two-car garages, fearing that this will potentially add significant traffic to already congested surrounding streets.

In addition, the current plan significantly reduces the green space at the site and narrows to 36 feet the existing 50 foot buffer with the adjoining garden apartments -- in contravention of WMATA's agreement with the community when the station was built. It does not appear to meet the criteria of the cross-jurisdictional Old Takoma Business Association or to follow the recommendations set forth in the Takoma Central District

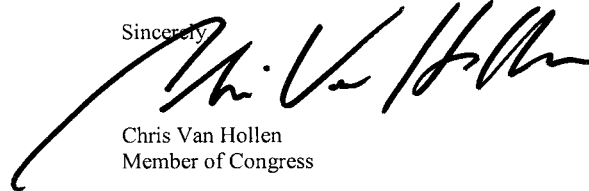
Plan -- a community driven planning process whose recommendations were unanimously ratified by the D.C. City Council in 2002.

Finally, the terms for the sale of this land -- nearly 7 acres of prime real estate in a very desirable neighborhood -- may not provide an adequate return to WMATA or the taxpayers. In my 2006 letter, I noted that under the sales agreement the developer is not liable for any costs incurred in relocating the current transit facilities. We are all cognizant of the budget difficulties that WMATA faces. At a time when it is considering fare increases and is actively advocating for dedicated funding sources to supplement its operating and capital budgets, it is incumbent upon WMATA to maximize its return on transactions such as this one.

These are some of the issues that have been brought to my attention by residents who live near the site, business owners in the neighborhood, and commuters who use the Takoma Metro station. Since the Staff Report was released in mid-August, hundreds of individuals have contacted me to express strong opposition to the current plan. After studying these issues, I have found their concerns to have merit. The effects of this decision will have long-lasting implications for our Takoma residents, businesses and commuters. It is vital that adequate time and consideration be given now to the concerns of the community to protect and enhance the quality of life for this neighborhood.

I urge WMATA not to approve the amendment to the Mass Transit Plan based on the current proposal for development of the Takoma Metro site.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Van Hollen", written over a horizontal line.

Chris Van Hollen
Member of Congress

cc: Hon. Eleanor Holmes Norton, U.S. House of Representatives
Hon. Tom Davis, U.S. House of Representatives
Hon. Adrian Fenty, Mayor, District of Columbia
Hon. Muriel Bowser, Councilmember, District of Columbia
Hon. Kathy Porter, Mayor, City of Takoma Park, MD
Mr. Jack Lester, EYA, Vice President of Land Acquisition